

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 8446

E. O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, AR

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT MANIPULATION OF NEWS MEDIA DURING AIR FORCE
CRISIS

1. SUMMARY. THE GOVT MADE EXTENSIVE USE OF THE NEWS MEDIA DURING THE RECENT AIR FORCE CRISIS. THIS MANIPULATION UPSET THE MILITARY, WHO FELT THAT THE GOVT'S HANDLING OF THE NEWS HELPED PROLONG THE CRISIS BY HARDENING THE REBEL POSITION AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. THE SUBSEQUENT RESIGNATION OF PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARY ELOY REBORA APPEARS TO CONFIRM THIS THEORY. THIS DIRECT GOVT MANIPULATION MAY OFFER A PREVIEW OF HOW IT INTENDS TO USE THE NEWS MEDIA IN THE UPCOMING ELECTION CAMPAIGN--IF INDEED IT HAS THE OPPORTUNITY. END SUMMARY.

2. FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE AF CRISIS, THE GOVT MADE EXTENSIVE USE OF THE NEWS MEDIA TO BOMBARD THE PUBLIC WITH A STEADY STREAM OF FAVORABLE GOVT ANNOUNCEMENTS ON THE NATIONAL RADIO AND TELEVISION NETWORK. IN ADDITION, ON DEC 20 THE EXECUTIVE DECREED THE CLOSURE OF RADIO RIVADAVIAN THE LEADING PRIVATE RADIO STATION IN BUENOS AIRES "FOR BROADCASTING SUBVERSIVE COMMUNIQUE AND INACCURATE INFORMATION." ACCORDING TO NEWS SOURCES, THE IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF THE CLOSURE WAS THE BROADCAST OF A REPORT THAT MRS. PERON HAD SUFFERED "AN ATTACK OF NERVES" AT GOVT HOUSE AND A DOCTOR AND NURSE HAD BEEN SUMMONED TO ATTEND HER. PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECY REBORA DENIED THE "ATTACK". HE
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CONFIRMED THAT A DOCTOR HAD BEEN CALLED, BUT INSISTED THAT

THIS HAD BEEN DONE ONLY AS A "PRECAUTIONARY MEASURE."
HOWEVER, RIVADAVIA DIRECTOR JAIME MONK TOLD EMBOFF THAT HE
FELT THE CLOSURE WAS "A CLEAR WARNING" TO ALL MEDIA TO CUT
BACK ON THEIR COVERAGE OF THE CRISIS.
THE CLOSURE, WHICH WAS WIDELY CONDEMNED IN POLITICAL CIRCLES,
WAS LIFTED WITHIN 24 HOURS BY THE CONCERTED ACTION OF
"MILITARY AND LABOR FRIENDS" ACCORDING TO MONK. THE GOVT'S
ORIGINAL ACTION, HOWEVER, DID LITTLE TO INCREASE PUBLIC OR
MILITARY CONFIDENCE IN ITS ABILITY TO REACT RATIONALLY TO
THE CRISIS.

3. OTHER SPECIFIC GOVT ACTIONS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE
MILITARY'S GROWING ANNOYANCE AND CONCERN WERE: A) ROBLEDO'S
ANNOUNCEMENT EARLY DEC 19 THAT "THE PROBLEM HAS BEEN SOLVED,"
WHEN IN FACT IT WAS FAR FROM RESOLVED. B) THE GOVT'S DEC 20
COMMUNIQUE ASSURING THAT "THE LEADERS OF THE MORON BASE NOW
RESPOND TO THEIR NATURAL COMMANDERS," WHILE THE NEGOTIATIONS
WERE STILL AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE, AND C) THE DEC 20 BROAD-
CAST OF GEN PERON'S LAST SPEECH FROM THE BALCONY OF
GOVT HOUSE IN WHICH HE WARNED OF THE "BANDITS" WHO IN THE
FUTURE WOULD ATTEMPT TO BLOCK THE PERONIST GOVT'S EFFORTS
TO CARRY OUT ITS PROGRAM. AT THAT TIME IT WAS CLEAR
REFERENCE TO THE LEFTIST ELEMENTS WITHIN THE PERONIST
MOVEMENT BUT BROADCAST IN THE MIDDLE OF A MILITARY
REVOLT IT CLEARLY HAD THE INTENTION OF BRANDING THE
REBEL OFFICERS WITH THE SAME NAME.

4. THE MILITARY FELT, WITH SOME JUSTIFICATION, THAT THIS
GOVT MANIPULATION OF THE NEWS MEDIA HELPED PROLONG THE
CRISIS BY HARDENING THE REBEL POSITION. LA OPINION SAID
"(GOVERNMENT) INTERFERENCE, DELIBERATE OR NOT, PERTURBED
THE NEGOTIATIONS... THE STRANGE MANIPULATION OF OFFICIAL
INFORMATION, WHICH WAS GENERALLY OUT OF LINE WITH THE
FACTS, CONTRIBUTED IN NO SMALL WAY TO THE HARDENING OF
NEGOTIATING POSITIONS THAT WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE MOVED MORE
EASILY TOWARD POINTS OF AGREEMENT." THE CONSTANT REPETITION
OF THE ANNOUNCEMENTS NOTED ABOVE "STIRRED UP DISTRUST AMONG
THE REBELS AND LED THEM TO HARDEN THEIR POSITION AND
GENERATED A VISIBLE ILL FEELING AMONG THE MILITARY
COMMANDERS."

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5. THIS "ILL FEELING" MANIFESTED ITSELF IN SEVERAL WAYS.
PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECY REBORA AT ONE POINT WAS CALLED
TO MILITARY HEADQUARTERS FOR AN EXPLANATION OF THE GOVT'S
MEDIA POLICY. MILITARY COMMANDERS IN THE INTERIOR,
OSTENSIBLY IN AGREEMENT WITH THE EXECUTIVE, PROHIBITED
THE MEDIA FROM REPORTING ANYTHING ABOUT THE CRISIS,
GOVT INSPIRED OR NOT, THIS, IN EFFECT, BARRED EVEN THE

REPORTING OF OFFICIAL GOVT COMMUNIQES. TO ENSURE COMPLIANCE, MILITARY FORCES OCCUPIED THE TRANSMISSION PLANTS OF RADIO AND TV STATIONS IN THE INTERIOR. SOME INTERIOR NEWSPAPERS APPEARED LATE, OTHERS WITH BLANK SPACES, AND A FEW DID NOT APPEAR AT ALL AFTER MILITARY AUTHORITIES CONFISCATED THEIR PRINTING PRESSES. THE MOST SIGNIFICANT RESULT OF THE MILITARY'S ANNOYANCE WAS PRESS SECY REBORA'S RESIGNATION FOLLOWING THE FINAL RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS. AS THE MOST OBVIOUS AND VISIBLE TARGET, HE WAS THE FIRST TO GO. HE WILL PROBABLY NOT BE THE LAST.

6. COMMENT: IN TERMS OF THE NEWS MEDIA, THE GOVT'S RESPONSE TO THE AF CRISIS WAS DISORGANIZED, SHORTSIGHTED, AND CERTAINLY CREATED MORE ENEMIES THAN CONVERTS TO ITS CAUSE. IN ADDITION, THIS DIRECT GOVT MANIPULATION OF THE NEWS MEDIA MAY OFFER A PREVIEW OF HOW THE GOVT MIGHT USE THE NEWS MEDIA IN THE UPCOMING ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN--PROVIDED OF COURSE THEY GET THROUGH TO ELECTIONS, WHICH SEEMS MOST UNLIKELY. ITS CONTINUED RELIANCE ON PARTY LOYALISTS INSTEAD OF PROVEN MEDIA PROFESSIONALS TO FILL SENSITIVE POSITIONS IN THE PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARIAT WILL CAUSE THE GOVT FURTHER PROBLEMS. A MORE PROFESSIONAL MEDIA STAFF COULD PROBABLY HAVE AVOIDED SOME OF THE MOST OBVIOUS GAFFES COMMITTED DURING THE RECENT CRISIS. THE OUTLOOK, HOWEVER, IS NOT GOOD. THE NEW PRESS SECRETARY, JORGE OSWALDO PAPALEO, IS CUT FROM THE SAME LOYALIST CLOTH AND WHETHER HE LASTS FOR LONG OR NOT, HIS APPOINTMENT APPEARS TO CONFIRM THAT THE GOVT DOES NOT INTEND TO CHANGE ITS MEDIA TACTICS.
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